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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the first steps (Planning and Organization) of a three-stage model designed to help school personnel deal with problem-oriented parent-teacher conferences. Seven distinct steps of the Planning and Organization stage are described in detail: (1) specifying the problem; (2) organizing information; (3) specifying objectives; (4) mastering helping skills; (5) understanding parental defenses; (6) planning a conference strategy; and (7) experiencing behavioral rehearsal and role playing. The second and third stages, Conferencing and Self-Evaluation, are briefly described. Although the three-stage model is intended primarily for problem-oriented parent conferences, it may also be useful in developmental conferences. (Author/NRB)

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PROBLEM-ORIENTED PARENT CONFERENCES

A TRAINING STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL PERSONNEL

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As noted by Wallbrown and Prichard (1978) "Parent conferencing has not been a popular topic with either educational researchers or theoreticians" (p. 1). There are occasional references to the topic by persons in the areas of school administration, counseling, school psychology, curriculum development, program evaluation, and supervision, but the treatment of parent conferencing is usually secondary to some other issue or topic. In those cases when parent conferencing does attract the attention of educators, the focus is usually on the informational aspects of conferencing rather than the emotional aspect of the interaction with parents. Some writers do mention and acknowledge the relevance of the feeling aspect of parent conferencing, but their writing usually emphasizes the informational aspect of conferencing. Consequently, teachers, administrators, counselors and other school personnel are often at a loss as to where they should go for practical assistance for improving their conferencing skills. In addition, most teachers and administrators feel that neither their academic training nor their student teaching experiences provided them with adequate skills in how to conduct problem-oriented parent conferences (Wallbrown, Vance, & Meadows, 1979).

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About the only common denominator that one finds in the training programs of teachers is that they have been told to "Say something nice about the student at the start of the conference" (Wallbrown & Prichard, 1978).

For purposes of this paper, it is very important to distinguish between normal developmental conferences and what Wallbrown, Dey, and Davison (in press) define as problem-oriented parent conferences. This distinction is important since most teachers feel they have the skills necessary to do a satisfactory job of working with parents in routine conferences which involve an exchange of information. In contrast, 84% of the 2,043 teachers, administrators, and counselors that we have worked with in classes, workshops, staff development activities, and consultation indicate that they feel the need to improve their skills in conducting problem-oriented parent conferences. By and large, teachers and administrators as well as other school personnel find it most difficult to work with angry, aggressive parents who attack their personal and professional competence and/or integrity rather than discussing issues. Both teachers and administrators often mention how difficult it is for them to deal with "the kind of person you can't reason with." Other more subtle varieties of parental defensiveness are discussed later in the paper since the angry, aggressive reaction is the one that can be used most conveniently in distinguishing between problem-oriented conferences and routine, developmental conferences.

Problem-Oriented Conferences

In an earlier paper, Wallbrown and Prichard (1978, p. 2) offered the following description of problem-oriented parent conferences:

> The term "problem-oriented conference," is difficult to define in a precise, scientific fashion, but the following statement should suffice to give the reader a feel for what is implied: By "problem-oriented conference" we mean those interactions between teacher and parent(s) which deal with some perceived problem and/or inadequacy in the behavior of the child or teacher.

A somewhat more refined definition and description of a problem-oriented conference is presented by Wallbrown, Dey and Davison (in press). A problem-oriented parent conference always involves the presence of strong, negative emotions on the part of either the teacher or the parent. Both the teacher and parents frequently experience strong negative emotions in a problem-oriented conference. These strong, negative emotions may be present in either overt form as in the case of direct hostility or a more covert form as in the case of denial or oblique threats. Problem-oriented parent conferences involve interacting at an emotional as well as an informational level. As a rule, the emotional aspects of the interaction predominate so that information is distorted, misperceived, or denied by those participating in the conference. A

great deal of information may be exchanged in a problem-oriented conference, but it is subordinate to strong emotions thus serving the purpose of manipulation, argument, and gaming. In other words, both teachers and parents can easily fall into defensive patterns without being aware of what is happening to them.

In contrast, Wallbrown, Dey and Davison (in press) use the term "developmental conference" to describe an exchange of information and ideas between the teacher and parents without the presence of strong emotions on the part of any of the participants. A developmental conference typically involves a parent-teacher interaction focused on a positive, rational exchange of information which neither party finds upsetting. Strong negative emotions are not evident in either overt or covert form. Most of the routine conferences regularly scheduled at the elementary and middle school levels fall into this category.

A THREE-STAGE MODEL

A three-stage model was developed to help school personnel to deal with problem-oriented parent conferences. This paper delineates the three stages which are: Planning and Organization, Conferencing, and Self-Evaluation. While each of the stages are treated in detail in the following sections, broadly speaking, stage one, Planning and Organization, suggests strategies for identifying and specifying the child's problem, organizing the information to be presented to parents, determining how this information should be

presented, and rehearsing how to present the difficulties. The second stage, Conferencing, addresses the actual conference and suggests possible "helping skills" that might be useful. Finally, Self-Evaluation, identifies how school personnel may evaluate their efforts. While the three-stage model is intended primarily for problem-oriented parent conferences, there is evidence to suggest that the model is also useful in developmental conferences (Wallbrown & Prichard, 1978).

Planning and Organization

Since a detailed treatment of the entire model is beyond the scope of this paper, the ensuing discussion is concerned primarily with the Planning and Organization stage of the model. A detailed description of the model in its entirety will be available in the work of Wallbrown, Dey, and Davison (in press). Because evaluation data as well as personal experiences in working with teachers indicated that conferencing skills are acquired most rapidly if they are taught in a stepwise, systematic fashion, the Planning and Organization stage of the model is divided into seven distinct steps. Each of these steps is described in the following sub-sections.

Specifying the Problem(s)

Rather than making vague, global statements which are difficult to substantiate, the first step, Specifying the Problem(s), is concerned with identifying and describing specific behaviors. "She's a

real troublemaker" or "He's always disrupting the class" are examples of such statements. From the standpoint of educational programming, these statements are nonproductive and they are also likely to anger the parents. What behaviors do you feel the student should develop? and What behaviors do you feel should be eliminated? are two questions that should be answered to help focus on the student's achievement in basic skills areas and/or on social behaviors which interfere with learning. Good descriptions of behavioral analysis are available in the works of Stephens (1976, 1978) and Cooper (1974).

In the case of "She's a real troublemaker" a teacher might actually count the number of times she pushes others, hits them, or whatever behavior appears to be the difficulty. In answering the question, "What behaviors do you feel the student should develop?" the teacher might decide that she should stay in her seat unless excused by the teacher, raise hand before talking and attend while teacher is giving directions. To the question "What behaviors do you feel should be eliminated?" the teacher might feel the following behaviors should be eliminated: hitting others, throwing objects, and talking out. When behavioral descriptions are utilized and counted, teachers are in a much better position to inform parents about how frequently such behaviors occur, how long they last and what they (teachers) have done to bring about the desired behavior change.

Organizing Information

The focus of the second step is to help school personnel organize their data so that they can give explicit information to the parents about the child's difficulty. This step also involves evaluating the evidence about the child so that the degree of certainty can be specified. "What evidence do you have to show the parents that is a problem area?" is the question used to focus this step in the model. It is intended to assist professionals to focus on the information needs of parents as the conference is planned.

In the example cited above, the school professional needs to delineate what evidence he or she has to indicate that hitting others is a problem for the child. Rather than saying, "She is always hitting others" the professional would be better served by saying to the parents, "I saw her hit two children yesterday, three teachers have reported that she hit other children on the playground yesterday, and three students have reported being hit by her in the last week."

While parents may understandably wish more information about the problem, they are much less likely to question the existence of the problem and more likely to agree that the behavior needs to be changed when presented with such a strong pattern of evidence.

Specifying Objectives

There are three guiding questions used in this step: "What changes in the student's behavior should you concentrate on producing?",

"What would you like the parents to do to help bring about the desired behaviors?", and What are you, the school professional, willing to do to bring about the desired behavioral changes?".

Since the school professional has already prepared descriptions of the behaviors to be developed and eliminated, the first question is useful in helping to determine the priority of the particular behaviors that should be changed. It also helps focus the professional on what behaviors can be reasonably changed in the school environment. This set of priorities should be shared with parents, but the school professional should also remain open to any input on the parents' part in determining which behaviors should be first priority.

The second question is intended to encourage school personnel to clarify what they want from parents before the conference. If parents are simply presented with a description of their child's problems, they frequently feel helpless, angry and upset, especially when they are not given specific suggestions as to how they can go about helping their child. Negative feelings are understandably engendered when parents sense that school personnel are giving them a message which says, in essence, "Your child has a problem, now what are you going to do about it?" Teachers report that parents are more likely to respond positively and become actively involved when they sense that their help is being solicited.

"What are you, the professional, willing to do to bring about the desired behavior changes?" focuses attention on the school

professional's responsibility to formulate a plan of action to help change the child's behavior. By formulating a tentative plan and sharing it with parents, the school professional can then gain valuable information from the parents about possible strategies useful to bring about the change as well as encouraging parents to help change similar behaviors at home. This question also helps focus the professional on the reality that there are limitations as to what she or he can do in the school and it thus facilitates the professional's ability to plan strategies that are realistic in terms of time and required energy.

Mastering Helping Skills

The fourth step, mastering helping skills, differs somewhat from the first three since it is necessary for teachers and other school professionals to master a specific set of helping skills. Several alternative systems of teaching helping skills are available which provide for the sequential acquisition of helping skills. For example we have found the work of Carkhuff (1977); Ivey and Authier (1978); Gazda, Asbury, Balzer, Childers, and Walters (1977); and Gordon (1970) particularly useful and based our own training procedures on a synthesis from these works. We strongly recommend that persons interested in providing skill-based training for parent conferencing consider making a detailed study of the work's of these authorities. For purposes of the present paper the important concept is that there are systematic helping skills which can be used to work through strong emotions and

gradually move toward mutual problem solving which we regard as being the ideal mode of interaction between school professsionals and parents. Mutual problem solving involves a creative sharing of information and ideas between parents and school personnel. Selected helping skills are described and illustrated below.

One such skill is active listening (Gordon, 1970) or attending (Carkhuff, 1977). By this we mean paying careful attention to what the parents are saying, how they are saying it, and the quality of their nonverbal behavior. Furthermore, we need to make sure that the parents are aware that we are listening to what they have to say. Some of the ways we can do this is to sit facing them squarely without barriers between us, maintain eye contact, and lean forward slightly. These are the very same kinds of nonverbal behaviors that we use when we are involved in an interesting conversation, even though we may not be aware of them. These are the kinds of behaviors that show parents we are interested in what they are saying and encourage them to go on sharing with us. On the other hand, if we sit behind a desk, look down, gaze around the room, fumble with materials, slouch in our chair, sigh deeply, or squirm and wiggle around in our chair, then we give the parents the impression that we are impatient, disinterested, and not listening to what they have to say. Such behaviors tend to increase the parents' anger and cut off further conversation.

At least two precautions are necessary if we are to be effective in using the attending skills mentioned above. These involve

interruptions and pauses. Most of us have difficulty allowing pauses when dealing with angry parents since we tend to talk fast and interrupt others when we are aroused by intense emotions such as anger, fright, or surprise. Such behavior is not helpful in a problem-oriented conference. One of the most serious mistakes we make in dealing with angry parents is talking too much rather than listening. Interruptions are especially inappropriate since they are a clear indication that we wish to cut off what the parents are saying rather than listening to them. In contrast, pauses are usually helpful because they are an invitation for the parents to collect their thoughts and go on with the conversation.

Several other procedures are also helpful in this regard. For example, a simple nodding of the head or brief verbal statement like "um-hum," "oh," or "I see" usually encourages the parents to continue sharing their concerns. Some counseling authorities call these skills minimal encourage since they are brief and designed to encourage further expression (Ivey & Authier, 1978).

Another useful technique is for the teacher to occasionally pick up some part of what the parents are saying and repeat it so it takes the form of a question. This is accomplished by raising our voice at the end of the part of the statement we are repeating. Let's take a parent statement and see how this can work:

> "What kind of teacher are you anyway! Don't tell me it's Karen's fault! She never had any trouble before she came to your class! You're the problem! Let's get that straight!!"

An appropriate response from the teacher might be, "I'm the problem?" Using this type of response not only encourages the parents to continue sharing, but also cues them concerning what part of their statement the teacher would like to know more about.

On the other hand, if the teacher had said, "She never had any trouble before?" then the parents would have been encouraged to pick up on this part of their statement and explain more about Karen's experiences with other teachers. Either of these two responses would have been appropriate depending on what aspect of the statement the teacher wished to pursue.

However, it would have been inappropriate for the teacher to have responded by saying "um-hum" or nodding the head. Either of these responses would probably have been interpreted by the parents as evidence that the teacher was acquiescing and agreeing that s/he was the cause of the problem when, in fact, the intent was only to indicate acceptance of the parent's feeling.

Asking <u>open questions</u> is another skill that can be highly effective in working with angry parents. Open questions are the kind that cannot be answered conveniently with a "yes" or "no." Open questions encourage further communication whereas closed questions tend to stifle conversation. To show how open questions are helpful, consider the following statement by an angry parent:

> "We don't want Bob in a special class or any kind of resource room that will get him labeled! There's not that much wrong with him! Our doctor said he could make it in a regular

class if he had a good teacher!"

We could question the physician's competence to make such a statement or use some sort of persuasive technique to convince the parents that "the school knows best." However, an open question such as, "How did the doctor describe a good teacher?" is more likely to be effective. The advantage of this question is that it not only encourages the parents to continue expressing their feelings, but also leads them to be more specific and think about what kind of instruction they (or their physician) expect for their child.

Another useful skill is what we call "personalizing" or using what others have called "I" messages. The advantage of personalizing is that the teacher acknowledges that what s/he is saying represents a perception, experience, or opinion which is open to further discussion. For example, if a teacher says, "David will not stay in his seat," the statement conveys an attitude of definitiveness and evaluation which is likely to pull defensiveness from the parents. On the other hand, if the teacher personalizes and says, "I'm having trouble getting David to stay in his seat," s/he comes across as less judgmental and more open to discussion. There is less need for the parents to defend their child by attacking the teacher.

The kind of helping skills we have discussed thus far are designed to help parents express and work through their emotions. We are not suggesting that they be used to manipulate parents or to avoid dealing with difficult issues. Rather, these helping skills are offered as a

means of establishing an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect between school personnel and parents. When these skills are used effectively, we are likely to find that the parents gradually become less upset and angry. At some point their anger is likely to decrease enough so that we can begin to refocus the conference and begin to interact with the parents in an informational rather than an emotional level.

Needless to say, we do not mean to suggest that these skills are a panacea that will always enable us to be successful in our work with angry parents. We do maintain, however, that they can be very helpful for those teachers who are willing to invest the time and effort necessary to become proficient in using them.

Understanding Parental Defenses

The fifth step, understanding parental defenses, involves helping school personnel become familiar with the more common types of defensive reactions which they are most likely to encounter in working with parents. The purpose of studying parental defensiveness is that school personnel are more likely to respond appropriately if they are able to anticipate how the parents will behave and what they are likely to say during the conference. Stated another way, the school professional is less likely to respond in a defensive manner if they understand the different varieties of parental defensiveness and how they serve to protect the integrity of the parent. In this section, we describe the three most common patterns of parental defensiveness.

Teachers find "direct personal attack" particularly disconcerting because it not only involves intense anger and denigration of the school personnel's professional competence, but also contains some type of threat (in direct or indirect form) to the school personnel's job or professional reputation. Statements such as:

"You have Arnold so upset he can't sleep!"

"You've got my son to the point where he hates school!"

"We can't let you do this to Jane!"

are examples of "active personal attack" if one can use his/her imagination to fill in the voice tone, inflection, and nonverbal behaviors which typically go with such statements. A teacher must be extremely secure in his/her personal and professional development before s/he can handle such statments without experiencing intense threat. Most teachers report that they typically respond to such statements by becoming terrified and overwhelmed or angry and aggressive.

The second type of parental defensiveness, "Covert subversion," involves a more subtle form of attack on the teacher which falls within socially acceptable bounds but can, nevertheless, be extremely devastating. The essential characteristic of "covert subversion" is that it involves subtly undermining the professional's self-confidence and integrity. The following are statements which illustrate "covert subversion": "Miss Woody (former teacher) said it would take a special kind of teacher to understand our Jimmy and work with him." "The psychologist said it would take a strong, male figure to relate to Glen" (said to a soft-spoken male teacher of small stature). "We were

hoping that Dawn would get a teacher that would be patient with her." Close examination of these statements will show that they all involve covert subversion in the sense that they imply some form of personal and/or professional inadequacy on the part of the school professional.

A further type of parental defensive which proves difficult for school personnel is what the authors have chosen to label "denial." The common denominator for the "denial" reaction is that the parents refuse to acknowledge the existence of any type of difficulty or problem. Some of the common types of statements which indicate a "denial" defense are as follows" "A lot of kids his age are the same way." "He'll grow out of it." "I was the same way when I was a kid." "You can make too much out of some little thing." Here again, careful scrutiny of these statements indicate that they all contain a message for the school professional. In one form or another, these statements carry a message which says to the professional that s/he is out of perspective and over-reacting to a normal set of behaviors.

These three types of parent defenses differ substantially in terms of emotional significance they hold for teachers, but the strategy is generally quite similar in all three cases. That is, the focus of the conference is shifted from discussing the difficulties/problems which the child is encountering in school to an attack on the personal and/or professional adequacy of school personnel. The emotional intensity of this attack as well as the degree of subtlety involved, and the openness with which it is conducted varies with the parents' reaction; but

the essential strategy is still the same--shifting from the child's behavior to the professional's adequacy.

Planning a Conferencing Strategy

The next step, planning a conferencing strategy, involves consideration of a wide range of variables. Some of the most important considerations are discussed in this section. First the type of approach used in the initial contact with the parents is an important aspect of a conferencing strategy. The type of approach can vary from eliciting feelings or requesting information from the parents through exchanging amenities and then immediately launching into providing information for the parents. Examples of eliciting feelings from the parents would be opening questions such as "How do you feel about Ted's progress in arithmetic this year?" or "How do you feel about the approach I'm using with Ted?" These kinds of questions are especially appropriate for parents who have strong negative feelings toward the teacher. When this type of approach is used it enables the parents to get into their negative feelings immediately so they can be talked out (catharted) and processed with the teacher. Questions of this kind indicate to the parent that the teacher is willing to acknowledge their feelings and cope with intense emotions during the conference. In other words, "It's okay to feel during our conference." By and large, most teachers are emotionally prepared to handle intense feelings which may be unleashed when such questions are used, especially if they have used the helping skills discussed earlier.

Another kind of approach involves requesting information from the parents about their observations of the child. This approach has the effect of showing the parents that the teacher is maintaining an open mind about their child and is sincerely interested in any information they can provide. The following questions are illustrative of those that can be used to request information about a child: "How does Tommy seem to be reacting to his new reading group?" How does Ted feel about having his seat changed?" "What kinds of activities does Janet enjoy most at home?" These kinds of questions are designed to gain information that the school professional can use to plan more effectively for the child. Such questions represent a relatively safe approach to opening a conference when the teacher has very little information about how the parents are likely to react during the conference.

Even within the confines of providing information, there is still a wide range of approaches the teacher can use in initiating the conference. There is a great deal of difference between saying, "Paul is just hopeless in reading," and "I'd like to share some of the concerns I have about Paul's progress in reading." Quite frankly, there is some question as to whether a conference should even be opened by launching into a direct statement of information unless the teacher already knows the parents and has established a good working relationship with them. Even here, there is probably some wisdom in following the traditional form of advice in "saying something nice" before getting down to a detailed discussion of the difficulties that need to be

worked on. A statement like, "Ann is behaving much better in the classroom, but we're still working on her fighting at recess" shows that the teacher is aware of at least some progress and does not see the child as being all bad.

Another variable of concern in deciding on a conference strategy is pacing. Pacing is concerned with the rate at which the conference is encouraged to move. In routine developmental conferencing, it is possible for the teacher to move along and introduce new material or ideas at a fairly rapid rate. As a rule, however, the pace must be slowed down considerably when the teacher is introducing material which elicits strong feelings from the parents. If the school professional anticipates that strong feeings will be involved in his/her interactions with the parents, then the conference should be planned so that it proceeds at a slower pace. When emotionally-laden material is being discussed it is critical that parents be allowed adequate time to express their feelings and process them through with the professional. Given this situation, school personnel are usually able to cover less material in conferences where emotionally-charged information is being treated.

One can identify several other variables which are important from the standpoint of deciding on a conference strategy. Among these variables are the sequencing of concerns and time allocation as well as more general features of the family itself such as the socioeconomic status, cultural level, ethnic background, and the quality of the relationship between parents.

Behavioral Rehearsal and Role Playing

The final step, behavioral rehearsal and role playing, represents the finishing touches of the Planning and Organization stage. It also represents the greatest opportunity for school personnel to learn from each other through sharing experiences. At this stage in training, school professionals have already mastered a set of rudimentary helping skills, attained familiarity with common parental defenses, and gained some experience in planning conferencing strategies. All of our experiences suggest that they thoroughly enjoy doing behavioral rehearsal on their own and engaging in role playing activities in triads. In the triad arrangement, one school professional takes the role of a parent, another assumes the role of the professional holding the conference, and the third acts as an observer. The professional who takes the parent role explains what happened to him/her in a particularly difficult conference and then acts out the role of the difficult parent with the other professional taking the role of the conferencer. The observer takes careful notes and shares his/her observations with the other participants. After feedback, the three members of the triad work together to restructure the conference and figure out the most effective strategy for handling it. Members of the triad then shift roles so the other two school professionals have the opportunity to gain help with conferences that they find particularly difficult for them. Always training activities at this stage involve the question, "What would I say if..."

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